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ABSTRACT

Baby talk, also known as motherese or child-directed speech, refers to a set of speech modifications commonly found in the language adults use to address young children. The same functional motivations underlying adult speech to other adults also shape adult speech to children. These include pedagogy, control, affection, social exchange, and information-giving. In each of these ares, baby talk is a coherent language style used with both children and adults, and it arises for identifiable, logical reasons. While use of an isolated baby talk feature may temporarily slow emergence of a specific linguistic construction, overall, as a speech register, it has never been shown to hamper linguistic growth. Research has addressed only the pedagogical function of baby talk. Every parent must evaluate the efficacy of baby talk, especially when it functions for control or as an expression of affection. Baby talk for social interaction does both foster language development and benefit the parent. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST: THE USES OF BABY TALK

by Naomi S. Baron

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ERIC Digest

The Uses of Baby Talk

Prepared by Naomi S. Baron

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This *Digest* is based on a monograph in the ERIC/CLL *Language in Education* series, *Pigeon-Birds and Rhyming Words: The Role of Parents in Language Learning*, by Naomi S. Baron. The monograph can be ordered from Prentice Hall Regents, Mail Order Processing, 200 Old Tappan Road, Old Tappan, NJ 07675 or by calling 1-201-767-5937.

Ask the average person what role parents play in their children's language learning, and you are likely to get one of two responses. You might hear that parents are irrelevant: Somehow kids manage to pick up language on their own. Alternatively, the respondent might say that parents talk to young children in special ways that aid language acquisition.

Such special language is known as *baby talk* (or *motherese*, or the more neutral term *child directed speech*) and refers to a set of speech modifications commonly found in the language adults use to address young children (see e.g., Snow & Ferguson, 1977; Snow, 1986).

Why Baby Talk?

The same functional motivations that underlie adult speech to other adults also shape adult speech to children. That is, adult-to-child speech is part of the larger framework of conversation we have with fluent members of a speech community. To understand why baby talk exists, and why it is sometimes structurally indistinguishable from language used for similar purposes in speech to adults, we focus on how language functions in human *interactive* behavior.

Language-as-interaction can be divided into five main areas: *pedagogy*, *control*, *affection*, *social exchange*, and *information*. Our goal in looking at each of these five areas is to establish that baby talk is a coherent language style used both with children and adults, and that it arises for identifiable, logical reasons.

Pedagogy. Many features of baby talk are primarily pedagogical in character. Consider phonology. The common baby talk techniques of speaking slow, overenunciating, and overemphasizing one or two words in a sentence ("That's a *truck*, Katie. It's a *truck*") are tailor-made for the 1- or 2-year-old child trying to segment the speech stream into comprehensible units. Many adults attempt (without great success) to simplify the terminology used for labeling the surrounding environment by substituting onomatopoetic variations (e.g., *choo-choo* for *train*) or familiar names for more complex realities (e.g., calling a *chimpanzee* a *monkey*).

Syntactically, the use of nouns instead of pronouns ("Mommy wants Sarah to drink her milk") is a logical strategy for reinforcing people's names. Demonstratives ("That's a ball") are ideal vehicles for teaching labels. Other syntactic and conversational devices (e.g., heightened grammaticality, shorter and simpler sentences, limitation of topic, and repetition) offer children clearer grammatical models than normally found in speech between adults. In much the same way, by building upon what a child says (through expansion or recast) adults provide developing speakers with immediate models that are linguistically related to what they have just said.

Many of the same special language features surface in pedagogically motivated adult speech to adults. Consider a minister preaching a Sunday sermon. His speech cadences are characterized by their slowness and clear enunciation. Particular emphasis is placed on an important word or phrase.

Syntactically, a sermonizing (or lecturing) register is far more grammatical than everyday language. Among casual speakers addressing adult interlocutors who might not easily understand what is being said (e.g., nonnative speakers of the language--or dialect), it is commonplace to use shorter and simpler sentences than when addressing compatriots fluent in the local patois.

In conversation between adults, the specific features seen in baby talk are less common. Although we occasionally repeat phrases for emphasis ("It was a sad day for America, a sad day indeed"), we don't pepper our speech with exact repetitions or expansions. Nonetheless, adult-to-adult language has special forms that serve a pedagogical function. An example is what we might call the "end run recast." A good conversationalist (or teacher) knows how to take what another person has said and turn it to pedagogical advantage. If a student asks a question that is not really on the subject, an instructor might say, "That's an interesting question. It leads us to ask..." whatever the professor wanted to talk about.

Control. The control function of language serves a number of goals: from getting a person's attention, to establishing a social pecking order, to monopolizing a conversation. Only the first of these is relevant to baby talk, especially in phonology. Listen to mothers addressing infants. Typically, one hears a greater range of frequencies than in speech directed to adults. This range is heavily motivated by a desire to get--and hold--the baby's attention. Intuitively, mothers seem to understand that babies attend more to novel and varied signals than to monotones. Another critical device is to increase speaking volume. A loud "Stop!" will generally get a toddler to halt in her tracks, even if she doesn't yet understand the meaning of the word.

In conversing with other adults, mature speakers exercise control through a number of linguistic means. To grab someone's attention, phonological variation in pitch, volume, or speed can be very effective. Consider the use of high-pitched speech (a very common feature of baby talk) in addressing hospital or nursing home patients (Caporael & Culbertson, 1986). Another example is the conversational control speakers achieve by asking

rhetorical questions and then proceding to answer them. Structurally, this technique is reminiscent of the tendency of parents with infants to carry the entire conversational burden, first asking questions and then providing answers. The functional motivation for this conversational monopoly is very different when used to address adults (where it is a form of control) than when used to address children (where parents are modeling social exchange).

Affection. As with pedagogy, when adults select special language to express affection, they use many of the same forms with other adults as they do with children. Just as parents use high pitch and special pronunciations of certain words to indicate warm feelings for children (drawing out the vowel sound in the name of a favorite toy, "Do you want to do a *pu-u-zzle* now?"), spouses and loved ones often use similar language styles with each other.

These same linguistic markers of affection appear in adult speech to non-linguistic creatures, including dogs, cats, or even plants. Hirsh-Pasek and Treiman (1982) coined the term *doggerel* for the language style many adults use in addressing canine companions. While at first blush, doggerel resembles baby talk, it turns out that only some of the linguistic features of baby talk appear in doggerel (e.g., use of high pitch, repetitions, supplying both questions and answers). Not surprisingly, these linguistic features tend to be baby talk features of affection and control, not pedagogy.

An exclusive feature in child-directed speech is the echoing (as an expression of closeness) of nonce-forms that children invent. For example, when one child began calling milk *ki*, his family soon began saying to the child, "Would you like some ki?" (Husband and wife also affectionately used the word in conversations with each other.)

Unique to adult-adult conversations that express affection is the use of substitutions. Recall that adults speaking to children typically substitute one word (e.g., *choo-choo*) for another that is presumed to be more difficult (e.g., *train*), or substitute proper nouns for pronouns ("Mommy wants Sarah to drink her milk") in an attempt to teach proper names. In adult language to adults, these same lexical substitutions serve not as forms of pedagogy but as expressions of affection. If a man says to his wife, "Shall we ride the choo-choo to Philadelphia?", he is not concerned that his mate might have difficulty pronouncing the initial *tr-* cluster in *train*.

Social Exchange. The main function of a good deal of human conversation--with both adults and children--is to keep social interaction going, even if there is nothing much to say. Typically, this feat can be accomplished by ostensibly using language for some other purpose.

When looking at the use of special language for social exchange, especially in adult-to-child conversation, one finds the same baby talk features already seen used for other language functions, especially pedagogy and the expression of affection. Parents often initiate words from the child's own repertoire (e.g., *ki* for *milk*). Syntactically, adult speech is simpler, shorter, and even occasionally ungrammatical with the goal of facilitating a response from the child. The same motivation underlies frequent questions (but less frequent declaratives), repetitions both of one's own utterances and of what the child has just said, and heavy use of expansions and recasts.

Adults also employ less obvious conversational techniques for maintaining social interaction. They often slip into the royal *we* ("Would we like to finish our spinach?"). They restrict the choice of topics. (Few 4-year-olds become involved when the conversation turns to budget deficits or the war on drugs.) A third parental tool for "keeping the conversation going" with very young children is to assume the role of both speaker and hearer by asking the question, presuming the response, and continuing the discourse ("Would you like me to burp you? Yes? I thought that was the problem. There, that's better").

Information. While the sharing of information is indeed an important function of language, it is also the most neutral structurally. Strict conveyance of information does not require any special language forms. Throughout the baby talk literature, there are no baby talk features that are described exclusively as communicating information. Exchanges that are strictly informational in character do take place between parent and child (e.g., "Mom, I want cake"), but the language itself has none of the distinguishing features we have been observing. The same can be said for "information only" speech directed to adults.

Does Baby Talk Help?

Should parents use baby talk in addressing children? Does it do any harm? Occasionally, use of an isolated baby talk feature may put a temporary damper on the emergence of a specific linguistic construction (e.g., delay in the development of pronouns if parents regularly substitute nouns for pronouns). Overall, though, baby talk as a speech register has never been shown to hamper linguistic growth.

What about positive benefits? When linguists have asked whether baby talk is a beneficial speech style, they have been concerned exclusively with whether the use of baby talk features by parents correlates with a child's subsequent development of conversation, phonology, meaning, or especially syntax.

By now it is recognizable, however, that pedagogy is but one function of baby talk. Baby talk is also an instrument of control, a means of expressing affection, and a device for prompting social interaction. While the pedagogical effects of baby talk are best measured through the child's subsequent language development, the effects of these other three functions must be assessed through the adult speaker: *Does* the adult gain control? *Does* the adult's language express his or her emotions? *Does* baby talk foster social exchange?

Every parent must individually evaluate the efficacy of baby talk, especially when it functions for control or as an expression of affection. One parent may find special language features (such as the use of diminutives) to be a comfortable way of expressing affection, while another parent might supplement normal language with lots of hugs and kisses.

What about baby talk and social interaction? Does this use of baby talk foster language development in the child? Does it benefit the parent? The answer to both questions is "yes." Human language grows out of people's need to interact with one another. The child needs to learn the formal words and constructions that make this interchange possible. The adult needs to feel that the infant in his arms is a real human with whom he can communicate, even though the child, as yet, knows only how to gurgle and cry.

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